Center for American Progress

The Extremist Campaign to Blame Immigrants for U.S. Environmental Problems

By Jenny Rowland-Shea and Sahir Doshi February 1, 2021

With growing frequency over the past four years, right-wing pundits, policymakers, and political operatives have fiercely and furiously blamed immigrants for the degradation and decline of nature in the United States. William Perry Pendley, who temporarily ran the U.S. Bureau of Land Management under former President Donald Trump, saw "immigration as one of the biggest threats to public lands," according to an agency spokesperson.[1] A handful of right-wing anti-immigration zealots, including Joe Guzzardi, have repeatedly misused data published by the Center for American Progress on nature loss to make xenophobic arguments for anti-immigration policies.[2] This so-called "greening of hate"—a term explored by Guardian reporter Susie Cagle—is a common refrain in a wide range of conservative and white supremacist arguments, including those of Ann Coulter, Fox News host Tucker Carlson, neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, and the manifestoes of more than one mass shooter.[3]

The claim that immigration is to blame for America's environmental problems is so absurd, racist, and out of the mainstream that it is easily debunked and tempting to ignore. The scientific community, and the little research that has been conducted in this area, resoundingly refutes the premise. Consider, for example, the environmental damage caused by weak and inadequate regulation of polluting industries; the destruction of wildlife habitat to accommodate wealthy exurbs and second homes; the design and propagation of policies that concentrate toxic poisons and environmental destruction near communities of color and low-income communities; the continued subsidization of fossil fuel extraction and trampling of Indigenous rights to accommodate drilling and mining projects; and the propagation of a throw-away culture by industrial powerhouses. All of these factors and others cause exponentially more severe environmental harm than a family that is fleeing violence, poverty, or suffering to seek a new life in the United States.

The extremist effort to blame immigrants for the nation's environmental problems deserves scrutiny—and not merely for the purpose of disproving its xenophobic and outlandish claims. The contours, origins, funding sources, and goals of this right-wing effort must be understood in order to effectively combat it and ensure

that the extremists pushing it have no place in the conservation movement. The individuals and organizations that are most fervently propagating this argument come largely from well-funded hate groups that are abusing discredited ideologies that were prevalent in the 19th-century American conservation movement in an attempt to make their racist rhetoric more palatable to a public concerned about the health of their environment.

While leaders of the contemporary, mainstream environmental movement in the United States have disavowed this strain of thought and are working to confront the legacies of colonialism and racism in environmental organizations and policies, a small set of right-wing political operatives are trying to magnify overtly xenophobic and false environmental arguments to achieve specific political objectives. In particular, these right-wing political operatives and their deep-pocketed funders are seeking to broaden the appeal of their anti-immigration zealotry by greenwashing their movement and supplying their right-wing base with alternative explanations for environmental decline that sidestep the culpability of the conservative anti-regulatory agenda. In their refusal to confront the true reasons for environmental decline, they are hurting the people—immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and people of color—who bear a disproportionate burden of environmental consequences and are increasingly the base of the climate justice and conservation movements.

Contextualizing anti-immigrant thought in environmentalism

Today's right-wing activists who are blaming immigrants for the destruction of nature are, unfortunately, drawing from and building on a long and troubling history of racism, colonialism, and xenophobia in the U.S. environmental movement that harks back to the violent dispossession of lands from Indigenous tribal nations. To understand the power and dangers of this extremist movement—and where it diverges from the current mainstream environmental movement—it is important to trace the origin of population control, eugenics, and anti-immigration ideologies within the U.S. environmental movement.

The discredited roots of environmental racism

Some of the earliest and most active proponents of land conservation in the United States also espoused anti-immigration, white supremacist, and racist views. For example, Madison Grant—a close friend of President Theodore Roosevelt and influential voice in species conservation, including playing a role in protecting the American bison and California redwood—served as director of the American Eugenics Society and vice president of the Immigration Restriction League.[4] Grant played a key role in the passage of a 1924 law restricting immigration by Asians and Arabs.[5] John Muir, known as the father of national parks, expressed racism toward Black and Native Americans and promoted ideas of restricting immigration by nonwhites.[6]

The notion that immigration was to blame for environmental destruction resurged in the 1970s, just as Europe's population was plateauing and that of the Global South began to grow. During this period, many deemed overpopulation-driven resource depletion one of the largest challenges facing the planet. Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb,* which argued that overpopulation would fuel famine and global upheaval, proved very influential in the environmental movement at the time.[7] This idea—which ignored the enormous difference in consumption patterns between countries—reinforced the idea already floating among U.S. nativists, which falsely associated global population growth and immigration growth.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these xenophobic ideas existed within some environmental nonprofits, including Earth First! and the Rewilding Institute, both of which were started by extremist activist Dave Foreman.[8] The environmental argument for anti-immigrant policies also tracks closely with the Sierra Club's history, and its association with one person—John Tanton—has had perhaps the most lasting impact.[9] Tanton, whom the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) calls "the racist architect of the modern anti-immigrant movement" and who died in 2019, was a Sierra Club official in the 1980s and went on to form many prominent anti-immigration groups, including many that dabble in environmental messaging.[10]

Up until the 1990s, population control was part of the Sierra Club's core platform. For decades, a faction within the organization—including Tanton—worked to use the Sierra Club's influence to promote policies to block immigration and undermine immigrant rights. In 1998, Tanton and others pushed a vote about whether or not the Sierra Club would take a strong public stance against immigration. The proposal was narrowly defeated by the Sierra Club's members, leading to a full separation from this ideology in the early 2000s.[11] But Tanton's groups continue to try to influence environmental progressives.[12]

Today, as major environmental groups grapple with their own systems of exclusion and injustice and reevaluate heroes and founders such as Muir and Roosevelt, the mainstream conservation movement no longer considers anti-immigrant arguments legitimate or accurate.[13]

The 'greening of hate'

While the history of this anti-immigrant argument has roots in environmentalism, today, this line of thinking is primarily propagated by extremists who are cloaking themselves as conservationists to make their arguments more palatable. Researchers refer to this phenomena as the "greening of hate."[14] The individuals making these arguments are backed by many of the most prominent anti-immigration groups and funders, several of which the SPLC have flagged as white supremacist hate groups.

Greenwashed hate groups and their funders

Nearly every formal argument claiming immigrants as the source of environmental degradation can be traced back to a handful of anti-immigration groups funded and founded by extremists far outside of the mainstream environmental movement.

Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). Founded by John Tanton, FAIR was deemed a hate group by the SPLC because of its ties to white supremacist groups and eugenicists.[15]

Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). Also founded by Tanton, CIS was deemed a hate group by the SPLC because it repeatedly publishes and promotes white supremacist and anti-Semitic writers and makes false claims about the criminality of immigrants.[16]

Progressives for Immigration Reform (PFIR). PFIR, also tied to Tanton, is perhaps the most central organization in the anti-immigrant greenwashing universe.[17] The group has been flagged by the SPLC for hosting a "cynical greenwashing campaign to recruit environmentalists to the anti-immigrant cause by blaming them for urban sprawl, overconsumption and a host of other environmental problems."[18]

Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS). CAPS was founded by Garrett Hardin, a University of California, Santa Barbara professor and FAIR board member, who famously wrote the essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons," which he used to support his ideology of preventing the "wrong" people—specifically nonwhite people—from reproducing.[19] Like many others on this list, the group has ties to Tanton and was found to have hired white supremacists.[20]

NumbersUSA. Also founded by Tanton, the group is considered a nativist organization along the lines of FAIR and CIS.[21] Don Weeden, of the Weeden Foundation, formerly served as the group's treasurer and on the board of directors and until recently was one of the group's independent directors.[22]

The Rewilding Institute. Compared with other groups on this list—which are largely focused on immigration but use environmentalism as a conduit—this one does focus on environmental issues but has frequently pushed similar lines of thought on immigration as those listed above, often through population-growth dog whistles.[23] The group was founded by Dave Foreman—who was kicked out of Earth First!, another group he co-founded—in the 1980s for his extreme anti-immigrant beliefs.[24] Foreman is still actively associated with Rewilding and frequently associates with organizations such as CAPS and publishes anti-immigration op-eds.[25]

Colcom Foundation. Based in Pittsburgh, Colcom was founded by Mellon Bank heiress Cordelia Scaife May, who believed that her life's purpose was curbing the threat of overpopulation by limiting immigration to the United States.[26] According to public tax filings, Colcom is the single-largest funder of anti-immigrant groups in the United States, giving around $150 million since 2005.[27] The foundation provides the bulk of funding to Tanton's anti-immigration groups, including PFIR, NumbersUSA, FAIR, and CIS, along with nominal money for environmental causes. In February 2020, activists protested Colcom, describing it as "not an environmental organization that dabbles in white supremacy, [but] a white supremacist group that dabbles in environmentalism." Several environmental organizations have subsequently severed ties to the foundation.[28] Colcom Vice President John Rohe, who decades ago published a book about Tanton, denied activists' claims about the organization, saying, "To be concerned about the level of immigrants due to overpopulation is not anti-immigrant."[29]

Weeden Foundation. Led by Don Weeden, the foundation has provided funding to CAPS, the Rewilding Institute, NumbersUSA, PFIR, FAIR, and CIS, along with biodiversity and wilderness conservation organizations and projects.[30] Several of its officers have also been very active in leadership and boards within the anti-immigration groups that they fund.[31]

Foundation for the Carolinas. Despite generally being well liked for their work to improve economic opportunity in Charlotte and around North Carolina, the group manages a donor-advised fund that has funneled money to FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA. Between 2006 and 2018, the foundation gave nearly $21 million in donor-advised gifts to at least nine anti-immigrant organizations, 85 percent of which went to Tanton-linked organizations.[32]

Anti-immigrant groups cloaking themselves in environmentalism to push a xenophobic agenda is not new.[33] While their scientifically meritless arguments are no longer welcome within the mainstream environmental movement, they continue to fuel the vitriol—and bad policy decisions, including draconian cuts to immigration levels, the evisceration of the U.S. refugee asylum systems, and the separation of families at the border—that hurt legitimate, effective solutions to the conservation and climate crisis.[34]

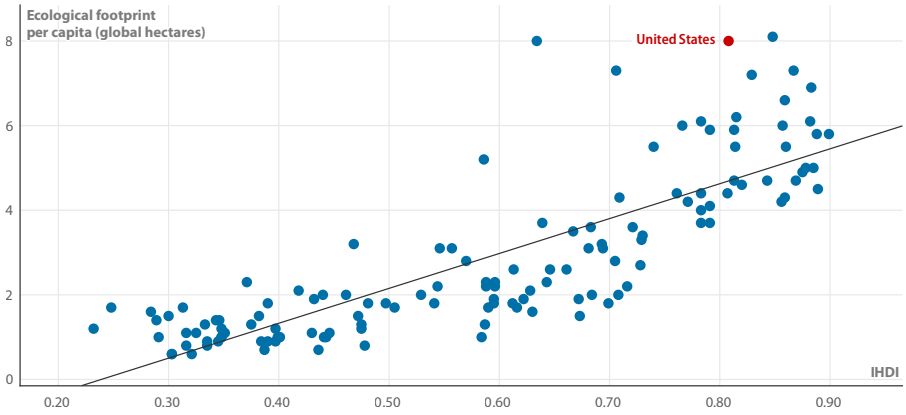
Racist rhetoric undermines the conservation movement

This small but organized and well-funded fringe of anti-immigration activists has produced arguments that range from openly bigoted and racist stereotypes to the more insidious and purportedly science-based claims about population that resonate with Eurocentric environmentalism of the 20th century. It bears repeating: These claims do not have the support of the scientific community, and the little research that has been conducted in this area resoundingly refutes them.[35] In fact, the vast majority of behavioral studies demonstrate that immigrants live more environmentally sustainable lifestyles than native-born Americans, so much so that immigrant density is associated with lower carbon emissions.[36]

FIGURE 1

The United States is an outlier in terms of its ecological footprint compared with its standard of living

Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) score and ecological footprint per capita, 2019



Notes: Includes only countries with more than 1 million people and for whom data were available.

Sources: United Nations Development Programme, "Human Development Report 2020" (New York: 2020), available at http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf; Global Footprint Network, "Home," available at https://data.footprintnetwork.org/#/ (last accessed January 2021).

Population-based arguments against immigration, meanwhile, are built on a series of flawed assumptions. The first is that the environmental health of the United States exists in isolation from the rest of the world, which has never been more untrue than in 2020, as the country grapples with climate change, the collapse of transnational migratory species, and a coronavirus pandemic born out of nature

destruction and overexploitation of wildlife in another continent.[37] The second is that it allows the interests driving the real problem—overconsumption and unregulated development—off the hook.[38] For example, corporate interests such as the oil and gas industry have undue influence on U.S. policy.[39] Per capita, the United States has a greater rate of climate emissions, air pollution, and nature destruction than most other countries and is an outlier even among countries with similar standards of living.[40] Policies aimed at limiting corporate capture and protecting public health—not curtailing immigration—are the solutions to these problems.

Polls show that communities of color—to which most immigrants and second-generation Americans belong—are the most concerned about this destruction and the likeliest to support policies that would protect the environment.[41] For example, polls show high Latino support for conserving water, reducing air pollution, and protecting wildlife.[42] This comes as no surprise given that communities of color—especially those that are also low-income—are more likely to suffer the consequences of unplanned urban sprawl, oil and gas drilling, deforestation, and pollution.[43] Studies show that white people contribute disproportionately to the problem of air pollution, while Black and Latino people are the likeliest to bear the burden of air pollution where they live.[44] Immigrants, who contribute less to pollution on average than native-born Americans, are still disproportionately likely to suffer the consequences of toxic pollution from industrial polluters.[45] In this context, genuine environmentalism cannot exclude or antagonize immigrants and second-generation Americans, who form a core constituency of the conservation movement.

Instead, this vitriol could actively harm the conservation movement by alienating and erasing both potential and existing allies, members, and leaders who are from immigrant backgrounds.[46] For example, immigrant leaders were central to the labor-driven movement to ban the use of toxic DDT pesticides in the 20th century.[47] More recently, Asian immigrants in the fishing industry faced the worst consequences of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill and participated heavily in cleanup efforts.[48] At the local level, immigrants are at the forefront of a range of environmental justice and conservation efforts, even as they remain underrepresented at the tables of national organizations and government agencies.[49] Moreover, the racist rhetoric that runs throughout the anti-immigration fringe could undermine the United States' ability to cooperate across borders with countries that will be key allies in fighting climate change, conserving biodiversity, and, ultimately, fighting the ecological degradation and disasters that often force people to flee their home countries to begin with.[50]

One of the most dramatic examples of how greenwashed nativism can harm the planet is the Trump administration's U.S.-Mexico border wall. Its construction was not only regarded as ineffective and wasteful but has also caused immense damage to the environment, including by blasting mountains, destroying ancient cactus, desecrating sacred sites of the Tohono O'odham Nation, and disrupting

the migration routes and survival of nearly 100 already imperiled species ranging from jaguars to monarch butterflies.[51] Notably, the Trump administration's extensive use of waivers to circumvent environmental standards and regulations allowed the federal government to destroy these lands with impunity in the name of immigration control.[52]

Focusing, instead, on the root causes of human displacement and migration—including those rooted in nature destruction and climate change—and increasing well-designed legal channels for people to seek entry to the United States would help U.S. immigration policy become more humane, more effective, and more environmentally sustainable.[53] Moreover, the Biden administration has an opportunity to focus on repairing the cruel and counterproductive mistakes of the Trump era to establish a working legal immigration system, asylum process, and pathway to citizenship—all of which will benefit the U.S. environmental movement.[54]

Conclusion

Anti-immigrant sentiments were a staple of mainstream Eurocentric conservation in the 19th and 20th centuries—but so were eugenics, unscientific species exterminations, and the purposeful usurpation of land from Indigenous tribes who often stewarded natural resources more effectively than the managers who followed. As an examination of funding sources and policy positions have found, the extremist groups now hawking misleading and easily debunked green-hate arguments are not acting in good faith.

Twenty-first century environmentalism is, by necessity, a multiracial, multigenerational, international, and anti-elitist movement whose diversity only makes it stronger. It is built of, by, and for all people—and immigrant-dense communities are its base.[55] If the evidence of bad actors funding green hate, the mounting scientific data, and 650 miles of border wall devastation are not evidence enough, this fact alone should make clear that these arguments do not belong in the modern environmental movement.

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The authors would like to thank Matt Lee-Ashley, Nicole Gentile, Tom Jawetz, Jessica Cobian, Tricia Woodcome, Keenan Alexander, and Will Beaudouin.

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